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### Oral History Interview: Steve A. Knighton

Steve A. Knighton

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Steve A Knighton  
(Signature - Interviewee)

Date: 11-25-07

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Interviewee's home address)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(City, State, Zip Code)

[Signature]  
(Signature - Witness)

Date: 11-25-07

TM: By way of introduction my name is Tim Mayo and today's date is November 25, 2007. I am in Charleston, West Virginia conducting a recorded interview of Mr. Steve Knighton. The purpose of this interview is to explore the 1974 textbook controversy from the standpoint of an educator. Following this interview, a typed transcript will be prepared and a courtesy copy will be mailed to you for your review and consideration. Inasmuch as this interview is being recorded for historical and scholarly purposes, the tape and the transcript will be available for the benefit of others and will be maintained at Marshall University in what I understand to be the archives. Before we begin, do I have your permission to tape this interview?

SK: Yes you do.

TM: Alright, please tell me your name.

SK: My name is Steve Knighton.

TM: What is the date of your birth?

SK: 12/02/49

TM: Where were you born?

SK: Charleston, West Virginia.

TM: Have you lived here your whole life?

SK: I have.

TM: What was your father's name?

SK: William

TM: And you mother's name and her maiden name?

SK: Betty Duff Knighton

TM: Do you have any siblings?

SK: Five: Gary, David, Michael, Cheryl and Linda

TM: Where were you mother and father from?

SK: Charleston

TM: What did you father do for a living, what was his career?

SK: Early in his career he was a letter carrier for the post office and then he went into his own business selling Pella doors and windows. My mother was a secretary at Union Carbide and after two children, decided it was probably more cost effective to stay at home and raise a family.

TM: She had three more on the way. I understand you are married, correct?

SK: Yes.

TM: What is your wife's name?

SK: Katherine

TM: What does she do for a living?

SK: She is the coordinator for Special Education at the West Virginia Department of Education.

TM: So both of you are involved in education?

SK: Yes.

TM: And she focuses on special education?

SK: Yes, she does special education, speech and language.

TM: What does that entail?

SK: Assistive technology for adaptive opportunities to have a level playing field in public education. She is responsible for organizing speech therapists and making sure the implementation of individualized educational programs. She also conducts camps for kids who have special needs beyond speech and language and also the assistive technology piece.

TM: So to some extent does she go about helping schools make reasonable accommodations for these children?

SK: Absolutely.

TM: I understand you also have children?

SK: Yes.

TM: And how many children do you have?

SK: We have three.



TM: And what are their names and ages?

SK: Shane is 35, Travis is 33 and Carrie is 31.

TM: Where do they reside?

SK: Shane is a major in the United States Air Force and lives in Springville, Ohio. Travis is a civil engineer and works in Erie, Pennsylvania. Carrie is an emergency room doctor in Akron, Ohio.

TM: So they're all out of state?

SK: Absolutely.

TM: No one followed in mom and dad's footsteps to be in the education field.

SK: Different generation.

TM: Are you a member of any particular religious faith or organization?

SK: Yes, I am Protestant Baptist.

TM: And do you typically worship on a weekly basis?

SK: Yes.

TM: Describe for me if you can your educational background?

SK: I went to public education in Kanawha County Schools. I graduated in 1967. I briefly attended Marshall University, got married and enrolled at West Virginia State College. I graduated from there in 1972 and then received a Master's Degree from West Virginia College of Graduate Studies in 1980. I have taken many post graduate courses which is the Master's Degree plus forty-five additional hours.

TM: And what was the Master's Degree in?

SK: Education Administration.

TM: And by way of the high schools growing up here locally what was the high school you graduated from?

SK: Stonewall Jackson High School.

TM: Which is no longer around?

SK: Right, consolidated with Charleston High School in 1990 and became Capital High.

TM: What about the middle school or junior high?

SK: I went to Grandview Elementary School, which there is still a Grandview Elementary although it has been replaced, and then Lincoln Junior High School, which has been consolidated with Woodrow Wilson to become Stonewall Jackson Middle School.

TM: Okay, that is the location out there on the West Side?

SK: Yes, right. Lincoln used to be the building where the Kroger store is on the West Side.

TM: Okay.

SK: Obviously it was razed. Woodrow Wilson was also on the West Side and it was torn down and those student bodies went to Stonewall Jackson High School campus, but it became the middle school when Capital High School was erected.

TM: By way of employment, what was the first job once you obtained a Master's Degree in Education Administration?

SK: I was vice principal here at Piedmont School from 1980 to 1982. Then in 1982, I was asked by the superintendent to take a principalship at Big Chimney Elementary until 1989 when the principal at Piedmont retired, I was the successful candidate to return to Piedmont. I have been here since 1989-90 school year.

TM: Most of your career has been here.

SK: Started in 1972 and except for the seven year hiatus at Big Chimney, I've been right here.

TM: Were you working when you were going after the Master's Degree in Education Administration?

SK: I was working as a teacher at Piedmont.

TM: And did you have a particular grade?

SK: Sixth grade. We had something called lead teachers at the time and after a couple of years as a team teacher, regular education teacher in the sixth grade, the hope was that the lead teacher would obtain their Master's Degree for an administrative position. It was kind of a training ground, apprenticeship, if you will so that one could do some administrative kinds of things as a teacher since the vice principalship didn't start until

1980. I was the very first vice principal so that you would get a feel for if you wanted administration as a career path.

TM: Okay, so in '72 did you assume the sixth grade position?

SK: Yes.

TM: And you maintained that up until the time you became vice principal?

SK: I was a lead teacher in there but yes, the first paid administrative position was vice principal in 1980.

TM: And as I want to focus on the sixth grade teacher position for the purposes of this question. Doing that particular job, did you have any curriculum duties and if so what were they?

SK: No not really. The only implementation of the determined curriculum, at that point, we had specialists at the Central Office and they did most of the decision making and it was pretty much predetermined what your role would be and that was the implementation.

TM: For example, as a sixth grade teacher in 1972 you were provided the text book or books that you would use during that year?

SK: That is true.

TM: And you were not permitted to deviate from that set curriculum.

SK: Not on my own, not without the sanctioning of the administration at the school. You might opt to not use the spelling book because you wanted to use the words from your reading series. If you got that approved then that was a slight deviation from the norm.

TM: Okay, and who would approve that?

SK: The school principal.

TM: Okay, so the school principal could authorize some slight deviations or could they authorize some wholesale deviations from curriculum?

SK: There were policies in place at that time that permitted the local school principal and the PTA to make decisions about textbooks, but that was never used prior to the 1974 textbook controversy. It was just a foregone conclusion that the textbooks that cost the taxpayers millions of dollars had been specifically designed and selected to meet a need at a local school level and so you trusted essentially the wisdom of others.

TM: I understand. Now what we've just done is covered a little about your biographical background. Now I want to reign in the focus as far as April or spring of 1974 is concerned so that when this Kanawha County textbook controversy arose, as you just mentioned, I have an understanding as to how your position was by way of marital status et cetera. In 1974, you were married at that time?

SK: That is true.

TM: And you wife was she employed in education as well?

SK: No, that was my first wife and she was a secretary at the Department of Highways.

TM: Okay. And did you have any children at that time in '74?

SK: Yes, as a matter of fact, Shane was born in '71 and Travis was born in April of '74.

TM: And were you also Protestant Baptist at that time?

SK: Yes.

TM: Would you say that your religious beliefs and convictions were as strong then as there are now, or not as strong then, what do you recall?

SK: I would hope that they're stronger today.

TM: Okay. What about political beliefs? That's not something I've asked you yet, do you recall what your political beliefs were then back in '74?

SK: Well you know we had just gone, we were still involved in the Vietnam War, and my brother had to serve over there. There was a lot of feeling of national unrest when it came to politics. You had hawks and doves essentially: people thinking that it was alright to go over there and others wanting to get out of there because they didn't see an end in sight. Déjà vu. There was political unrest and it was a time when in the sixties in high school and then college and the early seventies, there was a sense of freedom that kids had but their parents didn't. It was a great generation: they had fought World War II and now here we were going back into a war. It was certainly vague in terms of the context, but it was national unrest and people were either cheering you because you served your country or you were running off to Canada or you were sticking daisies in rifle barrels. There was also a lot of racial influence at the time, a lot of racial unrest, even in Kanawha County Schools. Unions were really strong in the late sixties and early seventies and of course, the West Virginia unions, the United Mine Workers and the autoworkers and the teamsters, had an influence with what the governments did and local politics as well. Politics were pretty corrupted at the time even locally. We had a mayor have to resign because of cocaine usage and we had teachers who were using and it was a

lot of corrupt politicians in the state as well, governors and it just seemed like everybody was out for themselves.

TM: Now here you are 1974, twenty-five years old one child already and another one on its way.

SK: Right.

TM: Would you consider yourself a political activist, or were you not? You held political beliefs, but you didn't wear them on your sleeve?

SK: My father was a city council person in 1960 to 1964 and then in 1964 he sought reelection and it was during that time that I saw the dirty politics. Dad was a good guy who was only doing it as a civic responsibility, but the political machinery wanted him to do some things he wasn't about to do. It got dirty and ugly, and I was tainted at that age and I'm a senior in high school in '67 and obviously ripe for being inducted, drafted into the Vietnam War and it was one of the very good reasons why I went to college. You didn't want to go to that war. You didn't get a lot of volunteers, but I was very unhappy with the politics. I was a democrat because dad was a democrat, but I didn't really understand the philosophies of the two political parties so I rode on the wisdom of my parents.

TM: You inherited the democratic beliefs at the time?

SK: They were.

TM: Do you recall what they were at the time?

SK: Not really. I'm probably a moderate then as I am now. I certainly was not like the flower children of the sixties. I did not go that extreme and I was not the guy in the airport, Hare Krishna, either.

TM: Okay, back in '74 would you have been the sixth grade teacher or the lead teacher?

SK: I was the sixth grade teacher.

TM: Once again your curriculum duties in '74 would have been the same as they were in 1972 as you already described them?

SK: Yes.

TM: Now having addressed your position and beliefs in 1974, I want to focus more on the textbook controversy itself. When did you first become aware that there was any sense that there was going to be perhaps a controversy surrounding textbooks to be utilized in the school system and maybe even in your class itself?

SK: There was a board member; her name was Mary Alice Moore. She had had a nickname it was "Sweet Alice." She was a minister's wife if my memory serves me correctly and she took objection to some of the stories that were found in this series that we were teaching in Piedmont in the sixth grade. It was called a communicative series, DC Heath Communicative, and she objected to its graphic violence and because, I think, she said it favored minority students. There was Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panthers and "Soul on Ice" and a lot of that influence was found in those books at the time. A lot of those authors had their own series at the high school, but even in the elementary schools we were seeing some racial bias. Not so much against minorities, but it was promoting diversity. You didn't have a textbook unless Ann Yokishima . . . you know you try to get multiculturalism in every text book, so it wasn't Jack and Jane went to the store. It was Sierra Garcia. Somebody's name had to have some kind of multicultural aspect to it, but Mrs. Moore objected to some of the strong language and to some of the graphic violence that was found in all of these books, K through 12 or 1 through 12. I don't know if we had a kindergarten at that time . . . we did, we did, and so she sought some outside help in trying to determine if these textbooks were as damning as she portrayed them. She got that support from outside people and that was, I think, the catalyst for what was a flash fire at the local school. We at the school system could read the newspaper accounts and the interviews that she was giving denouncing these textbooks as inappropriate. We knew it was brewing. Now as a teacher, I was not feeling very comfortable. I thought it was way past what an elementary age kid should be reading. The violence was pretty graphic and I had to use my adult judgment at twenty-four years old saying I wouldn't want my kid reading this stuff. Part of me agreed with her, but then it escalated beyond well let's take a critical look at what we're doing because these things just happened into the schools. You could have removed them, but it would have been expensive. She gathered support and I don't think used the right avenues. But maybe back then you didn't have those avenues open to the public for they weren't involved in the selection process and so they didn't feel like they had a voice in the drawing room. She was the reason that this controversy was created.

TM: Do you remember this happening? The time frame seems to be the spring of 1974 so that's essentially what I would consider towards the end of an existing school year?

SK: It was.

TM: Now, the controversy that she was generating was this with regard to textbooks which were scheduled to be implemented in the fall of 1974 school term?

SK: They were already in the classroom.

TM: They were already in the classroom?

SK: Yes they were. We had to remove them from the shelves.

TM: How long had those books that you were familiar with been in the classroom?

SK: The entire year.

TM: They had kind of just come about in

SK: '73-'74 school year.

TM: You had mentioned that you even agreed with her concerning some of the graphic violence, if you can remember an example?

SK: Well, I remember a story about Little Red Riding Hood and you know how the woodcutter goes and finds the wolf and chases the wolf away. Well that's the little fairy tale that I grew up with, but in the communicative series the woodsman comes in and decapitates the wolf and the blood is gushing. It was just way more violent than the fairy tale intended. They took it way beyond what Stephen King would.

TM: The Brothers Grimm didn't intend it that way?

SK: No, it was pretty graphic to read about somebody chopping off somebody's head and blood flowing.

TM: Did you read any of those stories that were graphic to the class and then decide wait a minute this is outrageous, or had you had an opportunity to preread these stories and then decide I'm not going to read them at all to the class and I'm not going to give these texts for the kids to take home?

SK: I see what your point is, and I did preread them but did not use personal judgment to say no I'm not going to be the vehicle to get these into the classroom. They were there and I was hired to implement the series and so I did. Looking back, I wish I had had a little more fortitude to say this is way beyond what I think is a good subject or a good story for kids to read.

TM: But at the time, what you were doing was following along with what the curriculum was and this was part of the curriculum?

SK: Absolutely.

TM: Did you know Mary Alice Moore before you started seeing her name in print or hearing her name bantered around the school?

SK: Just that she was a school board member. Didn't have any contact with her.

TM: What about the nickname "Sweet Alice," was that tongue in cheek perhaps?

SK: Yes because she was championing the rights for the most conservative and those who were very liberal tacked on this nickname saying that come on, you've got to be a



little understanding that when you do cut off the wolf's head it bleeds. But that was kind of being sarcastic.

TM: Now I want to focus on the minority student aspect that you mentioned. Not being a native West Virginian, there isn't a large minority population these days and I certainly think it is less than 5% of the state.

SK: It is.

TM: Do you recall what the minority population was in Kanawha County or perhaps we can make this more focused on you with regard to your classroom or your school in 1974?

SK: I was hired in 1972 with four other teachers because there was a housing project which, at the time, was called City Park Village. It was a social experiment. You had these tenements up on a hill that had a view of the city, the vista was exceptional. So you had these tenements, you had doctors and you had teachers, you had very professional people and mixed in with and living right beside you were people who didn't have a job or made minimum wage and they got their rent subsidized by the federal government. It was kind of a social experiment. Well it didn't take long before people decided that they didn't want to live beside somebody who didn't have a job or who couldn't carry on a conversation. So they moved out and that meant they had to fill that with business people. White collar weren't moving in and then blue collar got disenchanted with this theory and so what was happening was you had poor and minority families moving into City Park. Well with the advent of City Park opening, five teachers were hired. I was one of the five teachers that were hired in 1972 when the Park opened up. Then very quickly, I would say that within a year and a half, it went from an experiment to what is typified in American major cities as the minority and poverty took over. Well, Piedmont at the time had a 37% minority population. We were under a civil rights mandate at the time to desegregate some of these schools and to integrate them so that these schools would have minority populations, I think at the time, of 15%. You couldn't go beyond 15%. or I think it may have been 10% more than what your state was.

TM: So if I can understand what you're saying, you actually needed to bring in more white students.

SK: Exactly. A kind of perfect storm existed. You had a sex education aspect that had just been brought into the school system that had created some controversy. You know who should be teaching my child about sex ed, it should be a parent collaborative. Then you had the Title IX plus your minority population exceeding in some. Busing was an issue, how much time kids spent on the bus and now you've got textbooks. It was just the perfect storm. All it needed was a tender flash to explode and it got it with the textbook controversy. The minority population plus the feeling of America at the time that there was affirmative action going on at the time. So there was a real sense of distrust among everybody.



TM: Okay, so it sounds to me when you mention the affirmative action aspect, there was some resentment.

SK: Absolutely.

TM: What we would consider white males resenting the fact that minorities were being given jobs that they otherwise believe that they should have been given.

SK: Yes.

TM: We have more whites being brought into Piedmont?

SK: Yes.

TM: And these whites are from a different area?

SK: If it wasn't for the fact that at the time Piedmont was a brand new school in 1970, it opened to students on November 30, 1970. So this is '74, but we had about 115 kids that were out of area. That meant they were coming from schools outside of our school district boundaries. We had kids coming from about five different counties. Now the parents worked in Charleston and they were bringing their kids to Piedmont while they went to work because the Piedmont philosophy was so new and exciting and we did a lot of different things. Piedmont was the result of the consolidation of three schools: Capital, Kanawha and Mercer Elementary Schools. These three schools were really old buildings and they combined to build this new school in 1970, but there was still one other school in the East End and it was called Fruth Elementary. It was down below where the Town Center Mall is now. Fruth Elementary had mostly black students: there were a few white students but mostly black students. Well, that school is going to be closed and the population, the white population only was going to come to Piedmont and the black population was going to be sent across the river to Watts and Glenwood. So, it essentially lowered our black population overnight by 7%: from 37% to 30%.

TM: It sounds to me you have some consolidation issues going on where children and quite frankly their parents are being forced to deal with other persons from perhaps other segments of society or the city than what they were otherwise use to dealing with. And maybe they even had some resentment over the busing aspect as you mentioned.

SK: Yes.

TM: You had mentioned the race aspect with affirmative action. You also mentioned sex education earlier. And what was that about?

SK: Well, it was determined, and I believe this was about 1972 that sex education became a responsibility of public education. They wanted kids to learn some more clinical aspects of sex education. You know there was the 60's they had a lot of "free love" and there were a lot of epidemics going on. To counter that, the Federal

Government said we want public schools to become involved in sexually educating our kids about contraception, about making good choices. Of course, that offended a lot of religious groups because they felt like that should be responsibility of the parents or at least churches but not public education because you don't know the public educators as they come and go. They might have different religious affiliations and so that was very heated and not well received. Now a lot of community schools didn't have problems with it because those teachers had been there for years and years and years and probably trusted them and it wasn't a problem. But, a lot of schools it was. And so it was just more fuel for a fire that I think was sparked when all of this came together.

TM: What grade would this sex education have been dispensed?

SK: It was all grades.

TM: So as a sixth grade teacher you would have had some responsibility during the course of the calendar year to address sex education?

SK: Right, as a matter of fact it was called *Growing and Being* and it is still entitled *Growing and Being* and it still is being implemented today. We had to complete that by the end of the first semester, by December 7<sup>th</sup>.

TM: What were your thoughts personally, being a mid-twenties aged teacher teaching this topic to sixth graders?

SK: We recruited the services of the school nurse and so we really passed the buck.

TM: What were your responsibilities?

SK: We were responsible for gathering the kids together and the school nurse was responsible for the implementation.

TM: I take it with a lot of these country or statewide programs you get a government tape to show or something of that nature?

SK: There was a written curriculum we still have a written curriculum that's updated every five years. But, I don't recall any media. It was mostly just a nurse with maybe some slides or something.

TM: Do you recall the role of any group called the curriculum council during the 1974 or 1973 time period?

SK: Yes, the curriculum advisory council was extensively to serve as a filter and to give the public perspective and perception of curriculum in public education. The State would adopt a series of textbooks that they thought met the needs of the kids. But to give local schools some control, they said from this group of approved texts you choose the one you want to use. It might be more costly or less costly and have some ancillaries. So

the curriculum advisory council was supposed to filter out all the kinds of deviant and suggestive material.

TM: Was this curriculum advisory council county wide or school specific?

SK: It was county wide but now its school specific.

TM: Okay, so back in 1974 it would have been the Kanawha County curriculum advisory council that would have done this filtration process?

SK: That's my recollection and it was pretty much a rubber stamp. I mean you know we had a slew of people at the central office whose jobs were to make the best selection for our kids and they were really well trusted and well respected in their fields: social studies, English, spelling, science, reading. Now, they still wear many, many hats but at that time you had so many administrators out there that you just assumed that the materials that you were getting had been screened to all objectionable content.

TM: Now I might be getting a little bit confused and I apologize, but when you mentioned the central office, is that a state employee who had the job of proofing and researching and analyzing these texts and deciding which ones are appropriate? Is that something different from the curriculum advisory council?

SK: It was different. The recommendation would go from the state level to the county level to this advisory counsel for their approval and then it was rubber stamped.

TM: What comprised this advisory counsel? What qualifications would you need to have a seat on this body?

SK: I don't remember. Now we make recommendations from our community, our personal community to the boards up there.

TM: With regard to religion, do you recall how religion may have played a role in this? You had mentioned Mary Alice Moore was the wife of a minister?

SK: Yes.

TM: Did she get her church to support her and was it just Protestants, Catholics or was there a particular religious group that took her banner and ran with it?

SK: If you had to categorize, it would have been fundamentalist. I don't think I ever thought of it as being anything besides a group of fundamentalist churches. Not a lot of churches objected to the content of some of the information. There were some very fundamental churches in communities that were very, very ultra conservative. The idea, it was kind of funny, they objected to was the violence and they were the force behind the violence. They advocated it. But, I don't think Alice Moore purposefully solicited the confederates that essentially took up her cause. Once she made it known, this guy, I

don't know where he was from, I remember he came in and endorsed the fact that she was right. These textbooks were filth. Now mostly the filth was in the secondary schools according to published accounts. I did read some excerpts from some of the black authors and you know they used sexual connotations and Chaucers' Canterbury Tales was as provocative as what you were reading if you were to read it.

TM: Right.

SK: The books contained a little bit more smut and a lot more insinuations about race. The ultra-conservative fundamentalists jumped on this as a crusade and that's what it became. It became a crusade against the establishment that could impose this filth on their children. Now at the time, I'm almost positive I remember this correctly, there was a policy in place that allowed schools to react to parent dissension. If you say I don't like that textbook, it just doesn't meet my child's needs then they could offer you an alternative textbook. If you objected as a parent, your child was not forced to be a part of that class. Now that was never implemented and was really not even common knowledge at the time. This was something that I learned even later. I did not know that I had an opportunity to object as a parent. I certainly didn't know that parents could say I want my child removed from the class to a class that doesn't use this textbook. But that policy was in place, but nobody seemed to want to implement the policy.

TM: Obviously you had taught sixth grade and had used the same text with every student so no parent had come to you or no administrator had come to you requesting a particular child not be in class during a particular discussion.

SK: No. I cannot recall any parent asking me. That wasn't to say we didn't have parents who objected, but I can't remember any parent in my classroom objecting.

TM: I'm just curious, did any parent ever come forward for sex education and say I object to you teaching my child this? I want my child, my son, my daughter removed from the classroom and not exposed?

SK: It still happens today Tim. We still have, we have to have parent permission in order to subject your child to the sexual harassment prevention education. If you don't have the permission, then they don't participate. Every year, people object to their child being subjected to that.

TM: Okay, so you had that experience with that?

SK: Yes.

TM: Okay, what about you talked about the wealth of the people up on the Hill, city view that had the nice vista. Did you see that the role of any social economic role in this textbook controversy?

SK: At Piedmont I did not. We had some parents who kept their kids out of school. We had parents who protested in front of our school with picket signs, but they were not our parents. That was pretty much the typical situation around the county. Most communities felt like they trusted the teachers and the central office to do what was best. If parents were rejecting materials, the schools basically rejected them or they would remove them. But that wasn't good enough and the people from the east end of the county and the far west end of the county seemed to be the most vocal and certainly dissident and would bring in protestors to your school to picket outside. The idea was to close schools.

TM: I want to spend a second talking about some of the books which were the subject of the controversy. You had mentioned the D.C. Heath textbook that had graphic violence in it. Quite frankly, there were also books that I have enjoyed reading later in life: Lord of the Flies, which was a great book and is, of course, filled with violence. It involved the killing of a character by the name of Piggy, if I can recall, and was made into a horrible movie. Is that still a part of the curriculum in high schools these days?

SK: I do not know if that particular title is. I do know that they still have as a matter of fact currently, there are books at the Nitro High School that have been deemed objectionable by some parents and they are trying to have them removed from the school. The policy that is in place says that you don't have to subject your child to them but, you can't have the unilateral authority to remove a textbook from the school that has already been adopted. Nobody has that authority besides the local Board of Education.

TM: The other books on this list include Paradise Lost, The Great Gatsby, Old Man and the Sea, The Crucible, The Good Earth, Crime and Punishment, The Illiad, and Animal Farm.

SK: I read The Illiad and it was great.

TM: Animal Farm makes a strong political statement. I can see the violence in Lord of the Flies, in Crime and Punishment and even in The Illiad. We can even see the religious aspects of the Old Man in the Sea, but The Great Gatsby, I'm not sure what commentary is being made there. I look at these books and it surprises me that they were banned.

SK: You have to walk a fine line between good literature and censorship and I think that's what local school improvement councils are supposed to do nowadays. There are some books that were removed from libraries, but there are placed in a separate section for kids to check out with parental permission. Most high school libraries have a separate section with many of these titles and you would have to have parental permission to check those out if you are under 18.

TM: That's interesting. Now in sixth grade were you reading chapter books?

SK: At that time, chapter books were not a big deal, especially in the classroom. You checked out books in the library and there were some books that many elementary

libraries had, and I can't remember a title now, they were put in a separate section. We used a reading book that had stories in a sequence but they were not chapter books. These were pretty much books or stories that had been redesigned. They weren't the original text. I'll give you the example of Little Red Riding Hood and that was not the same story we were told when we were young.

TM: Was that part of the DC Heath text?

SK: Yes it was.

TM: With regard to the events as this played out, I think we've already addressed some of your personal thoughts on the chapter books and the graphic nature being perhaps too graphic for the students. What do you recall about how this played out? You mentioned Mary Alice Moore stepping forward getting some support from various segments of society that is the churches you had mentioned. Now what is it that you recall of the events and how that played out?

SK: It was in Spring of '74 that I think all of this came to a head and with the advent of spring, people were able to do a little more out in public without freezing. That probably contributed, but local ministers, I think their names were Horan and Charles Quigley seemed to be the ringleaders of these protests and so their parishioners, I would assume were members of UMWA and teamsters, and I think very conservative and they convinced those congregations that this was the devil's handiwork and that they needed to take a role as crusaders to eliminate these textbooks from Kanawha County Schools. So they organized loosely and sometimes in vigilante kinds of ways. In some instances in a highly organized fashion because there was the strike associated with it. They tried to close schools and tried to put pressure on politicians to get rid of these textbooks because local authorities said "No, we're not going to do this. We'll remove them up to our school library and you can ask your child not to participate, but we're not going to make the unilateral decision, the capricious decision to remove these books because you say so." I think they were unwilling to bend to a small segment which was obviously radical. They actually dynamited a school up Campbell's Creek. I don't think there was a lot of destruction, a lot of windows broken out and things. I know there was a skirmish on a picket line and I think one of the people were wounded, but I don't think it was serious. There were lots of pickets at schools, lots of bus garages and the buses were not allowed to leave the garages because the parents were standing in the way. Most of these people were highly unionized and they didn't want to take on the role of a strike buster. Almost a fifth of the 45,000 students were staying at home as a result. Some parents were just afraid for their kid's safety and not in support of the strike, just afraid. Some deliberately withheld their kids from school because their parents were a part of this radical movement. Something else that happened during that time was an energy crisis that we had to deal with as well during this nasty time in the school system. We lost a superintendent as he resigned ostensibly to take a job somewhere else, but more likely he was just trying to get out. They had death threats against him. We all had threats if we crossed the line and we were called rotten names. One time when I came to school at Piedmont, CBS was here filming. You know you're in trouble when a national network



is at your school trying to film. Violence escalated to the point where kids were being removed from schools for personal safety, but eventually at the end of that school year the National Guard was asked to come in and they refused because that was a scenario that you didn't want nationally publicized. When you bring in the National Guard you have issues you can't deal with. I think that was a smart move not bringing them in. Basically economics were affected. A lot of churches were affected. Some people are out of teaching. You lost a superintendent. A board member resigned. A lot of policies went into place that heretofore were not very well known or needed to be tweaked determining how textbooks came into schools.

TM: Before we get to the consequences, let me ask whether in your sixth grade class, did you experience a fifth of your students being out during this time?

SK: Not a fifth. We did have some miss school because of their parents' association with mining or some other kind of union. Because what they were trying to do was to get all the union support to shut down the economy: trucks were stopped, mines were closed, pickets were out. It had an awful effect, but locally we just didn't have a lot of kids absent.

TM: What about the students that were present. Were these students able to function and focus on school or was there a lot of distraction going on with the people standing outside the schools, striking or trying to barricade the entrances and exits?

SK: It definitely had an impact on the quality of the education the kids were receiving on a day to day basis. Business went on as usual. There always was a feeling of angst among the teaching staff how might this escalate on a day to day basis. We were often given warnings of coming problems. The board of education was only three blocks from us and that was the focal point for demonstrations. Being the closest elementary school, we were a natural consequence of too many picketers coming down to close the school. So they would call us and tell us people were coming. There was never a serious altercation here. There was a disruption of a routine. I don't think kids got the best teaching while this happened, but all in all, I think it missed the schools that were outside of those geographic areas of the eastern part and the western parts of the county.

TM: Did you experience any rifts among the educators? Were some educators who are union members joining arms with these people and protesting as well?

SK: I don't remember that happening, but subsequent to this was a teacher's walkout. I think from this show of strength and support for this textbook controversy, that teachers gained the insight that we can band together and our voices can be heard. It was the next year that you had a huge teacher walkout. I really think that was a consequence. I can't recall teachers being divided here in our school. Now, we had about five minority teachers at the time and I think we rallied around them because a lot of the finger pointing had to do with racism. The Black Panthers, that were popular at that time, were negatively influencing the education of high school students. I think any black person at

the time, especially a teacher was looked at very critically. There was a lot of circling the wagons around our staff. We were more cohesive and there wasn't any divisive action.

TM: As we've gone through this interview, one issue you had mentioned was the rise in this text of multiculturalism. In particular, I would imagine it would be some ghetto or inner city information about people eking out an existence of violence and crime in the inner city and struggling to live. That lifestyle was making its way into West Virginia, which being a rural white majority population, doesn't have that violence?

SK: Especially our school. We had a very diverse population: we had a lot of Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese and some Russians. We probably had the most diverse population for elementary schools and that was probably a good thing. We weren't singling out one race. We had more per capita in our building than you had in the whole state.

TM: I never would have thought that.

SK: The soldiers coming back and bringing home their Vietnamese wives and things and we still have some Vietnamese kids here. With the advent of City Park opening up and Philippino and Pakistani doctors, those kids were sent to Piedmont. But they were being removed and replaced with African American children so there was 37% black population. This was extremely high at this time. Our population now is 72% African American. We had City Park and then Washington Manor, which was another housing project, then we had a homeless shelter. When you describe the life in the ghetto in the inner city metropolitan area, the closest thing to inner city schools that West Virginia probably has is Piedmont.

TM: So largely some of these texts that might have been at the heart of this problem were not really offensive to the population here?

SK: No. Actually here they were embraced by the 37% minority population.

TM: When I think back about multiculturalism in schools one of my favorite shows growing up was "Welcome Back Kotter," a show which puts forward a diverse student body. You've mentioned this school was already ahead of the curve by way of evolving and accepting a new world order with a lot of different cultures coming to it. You said they brought in strikers and protesters, citizens that maybe didn't even have children coming to this school that would come here to protest. What would they do?

SK: They basically would march up and down the front sidewalk holding signs and denounce the textbooks essentially asking for removal of the books and support staff.

TM: What did the signs say?

SK: I don't really recall.

TM: They wanted the books pulled from the classroom. So it seems to me that the



board of education made some accommodation. Perhaps, let's get the books out of the classroom but we're going to leave them in the library.

SK: Yes.

TM: But the board would not pull them out of the library and that was the dispute then because these people wanted the books completely out?

SK: That's true.

TM: You said they wanted some support staff out and the superintendent out?

SK: Even the deputy superintendent that had been here for twelve years, after this he left. Once you had the responsibility for creating this furor, you better hope this doesn't follow you. Everybody who was in a leadership position, they were asking for their removal.

TM: Okay.

SK: Not many of them did leave. Alice Moore left because her husband took another church in Ohio. When she left the board, the furor was pretty much over. I'm sure Reverend Horan was indicted by the feds for bombing or inciting a riot and was sentenced to prison.

TM: You mentioned a dynamiting or bombing an elementary school. Where was that?

SK: It was Campbell's Creek and I think it was Midway Elementary.

TM: Did anyone get injured in that?

SK: No, they didn't want to do it during the school session. They would make sure they did it "safely."

TM: They were trying to bomb in a safe way?

SK: Yes.

TM: What about shootings? I've seen in some newspaper articles accounts of perhaps two shootings. Do you recall anything about shootings?

SK: The only shooting I recall was at a picket line at the UMW or a teamster picket line and it was not associated with a school, but someone was trying to cross a picket line to get to their job.

TM: Now being an educator, I don't know what interaction you had with school bus employees, but it seems to me that your daily run of the gauntlet would have been

coming in and leaving the building and then you're otherwise safe, unlike the school bus drivers were out on the road and essentially a big yellow target for everyone to either block the road or somehow interfere. Did you have any interaction with school bus drivers?

SK: Just ours. Although our bus drivers serve other populations such as a middle school or high school, the bus drivers would bemoan the fact that they were being targeted with hate mail and threats on the phone and the buses being egged, but we could only empathize with them.

TM: Did you feel safe in the building?

SK: Yes, I never felt like we were in harm's way.

TM: Was there any vandalism that took place?

SK: Just, I don't know if you could attribute it to what was happening but we just had graffiti.

TM: Graffiti targeted at this controversy?

SK: Just stupid stuff, mostly racial so we didn't know if it was textbook or not, and that was pre and post.

TM: We've talked about the UMW and the teamsters joining forces and perhaps this being a show of solidarity or a way to empower to Mary Alice Moore and her followers, but with regard to groups like the KKK, what was your knowledge of your involvement if any?

SK: I just, like you, saw in newspaper accounts that they were being solicited to come. I know they were supposed to be here, but I never saw anything like that at Piedmont.

TM: Conversely you've mentioned the Black Panther party and perhaps if they perceived this as a racial thing then they might have participated. Do you recall if they participated in this?

SK: No, I don't think there was ever a time that we had any kind of minority dissenting voice. As Mary Alice Moore kept saying, there was more emphasis being placed on blacks than whites and making it a racial issue. Now there were lots of black authors in that secondary curriculum, much more so than it ever has been. It was true to the era and maybe that made them more attractive at the time. Mary Alice Moore did try to make this a racial thing, but I don't recall seeing the KKK involved.

TM: What about political groups? Two groups that I had seen referenced in some literature were the International Workers Party and Young Socialists Party. Do recall anything about them being involved?

SK: I really don't.

TM: It sounds to me from talking to you that your recollection was primarily union groups and then fundamentalist religious groups.

SK: Yes.

TM: Now the media you mentioned, CBS had come to your school and was doing some filming and obviously we know the newspapers grabbed hold of this and were running with it maybe on a daily or weekly basis. What do you recall about the media's role in this? Did they help to incite this situation, to blow it up out of proportion or to help resolve the situation?

SK: I think there were varying accounts in some stories. In some, they were trying to sensationalize it and I think in others, they were trying to bring about some kind of compromise by bringing in people from the outside who were not affected by this but were trying to mediate it from afar. I know that Alice Moore did ask for an outside opinion and that that person solidified her position that these textbooks were inappropriate for kids. Then the media brought this to the attention of everybody else. You know it's not just "Sweet Alice," she got some kind of national endorsement that these books must be horrible and because the media made this known to all conservative groups across the country, they got endorsements from everybody too. Before long it became known to us that other school districts were taking a very critical look at their own textbooks and they were finding objectionable materials. School districts took immediate action by removing text books that were found objectionable. The media was keeping this front page. I think the effect of the media was insightful as they were using the newspaper to promote their own personal agenda.

TM: Piedmont gets more air time than any other school and it probably has something to do with geography, other than the captain of the ship, being downtown and being close to all of the news outlets right down here within blocks and perhaps even having such a diverse population. Did Piedmont find itself in print during this controversy when it really wasn't one of the schools that was part of the crisis?

SK: No, as a matter of fact the principal was very adamant that we were to have no negative publicity.

TM: Now I want to focus on you as a person and as a professional educator following this episode or even during the course that this was going on. You had mentioned threats being made. Were there threats being made to you?

SK: No there were not.

TM: What about verbal harassment?

SK: Typically the pickets were not here when we got to school. They waited on buses to try and keep the buses from coming and there were probably only eight or ten episodes where there were pickets here, loosely organized. They would just say things like, "Why are you doing this to our kids" and "You should be ashamed of yourself." There really wasn't a lot of cursing or "I'm going to kill you" kinds of things. They were just trying to appeal to your sense of guilt, as if we had any.

TM: Did you ever engage them in dialog? Did you ever respond to them?

SK: Our principal tried to keep us from being involved in this professionally for the reputation of the school. We didn't see any benefit in embedding ourselves in this so we took the coward's way out and just said, "Our principal said we can't talk to you."

TM: And that worked well for you?

SK: It did. It served its purpose.

TM: I take it that no one threatened you with any particular lawsuit?

SK: No.

TM: We talked a lot about picketing and striking and a lot of the problems that were generated. Did any parents ever come in and say, "Look I think you're doing a good job"? Any show of support if you will?

SK: I don't recall any specific instances of support, but we had unbelievable parent support at that time. In the spring, we always did a huge theatrical production. At the time, I can tell you what it was. All I know is that all of the years I was at Piedmont, every spring we had standing room only for our music program and it was not interrupted. Things mostly happened during the day to make a statement.

TM: Did the controversy have any impact on the way you taught class?

SK: Once this became so controversial and the direction of the school system was if parents found it objectionable, the books can go to the library. Our school made the decision not to teach it. We used the previous series. So in order to dispel parent dissension, we made the unilateral decision to use the outdated series so it was not so much of a problem for us to pick and choose. We put the objectionable series in the library, but we didn't teach them.

TM: If there were no parents causing problems, what was the purpose of saying we're not going to use this objectionable curriculum?

SK: Just so we wouldn't be eventually targeted. The principal's decision was to eliminate the possibility of being picketed for a legitimate reason.

TM: The old textbooks, I take it from a professional standpoint you were comfortable with the material?

SK: Absolutely. I mean that was what I had been teaching the two previous years. I thought they were good.

TM: It sounded to me when looking at this, and we've really addressed the impact of the controversy and in answering some of the questions I've already asked you, you explained the relationship between you and the administration. It sounds to me like the educators here were in agreement with the principal and the teachers said "Let's do our jobs and let the board of education do the policing of the curriculum." Is that fair to say?

SK: That is true. I think our main goal was not to become controversial and that was a directive from this principal's office.

TM: And you succeeded in that regard?

SK: Yes, we were a new school we had lots going for us and we did not want to create this incendiary kind of environment.

TM: Who was the principal at the time?

SK: Virginia Willie.

TM: Do you recall or do you have any knowledge of what her relationship was with the board of education during this time period.

SK: I was a very new teacher as this was my third year. All I know was she enjoyed a huge following and admiration and respect uptown. There weren't too many doctors with a principalship and she had gotten hers from Ohio State. This was the very first school to undergo the North Central Accreditation process and we did that in the subsequent year. She was desperately trying to balance what was best for the school against what the central office was having to deal with. She wanted to support them, but she wasn't about to put herself in a controversial position where the school was going to be damaged in it's reputation.

TM: And there was an accreditation process going on?

SK: The next year.

TM: But I take it she's gearing up for it, laying the foundation for it?

SK: That's true.

TM: And what was the purpose of the accreditation?

SK: It was a brand new opportunity for elementary schools. You had to do a self evaluation and it was just as intense as you could imagine that colleges go through. If you're secondary, you have to have this accreditation. We were the first elementary school in the state to have this national designation.

TM: Okay, I want you to bring this forward. How is curriculum chosen today so that we can see how curriculum selection has evolved from this controversy?

SK: I think back then I was not privy to the nuances of textbook selection. I do know that there was a state selection committee, which there still is, and they are charged with selecting textbooks. Our state has what is called content standards. These are essentially the skills that kids are taught at a particular grade level and these skills should be taught whether through a textbook or not. Back then, the textbook drove the curriculum and it was the curriculum. Now, the textbook is the tool and not the exclusive means for teaching the curriculum. I think that was a consequence of the textbook controversy. They didn't want the textbook to be the sole source of what goes on in the classroom. You're charged with skills now, its more skills based than textbook based.

TM: Do you still have a committee that selects the textbooks that are appropriate for delivering these standards?

SK: The state still comes up with a list. The counties then have teacher and parent groups that take the time to evaluate each series and then make a recommendation to the board of education which ultimately makes the decision.

TM: Does this involve parents on a statewide basis?

SK: You have a state group of people and then you have your own local textbook adoption committee. I was actually a chair person for the reading textbook selection committee in either '86 or '88. After 1974, you have to be careful to have your name associated with this and we did have some legitimate concerns over what we were going to decide upon and so my recommendation was to select two and let schools choose. That was the first time the county had two to choose from at the school level.

TM: You rode both sides of the fence?

SK: Absolutely, I was straddling.

TM: The skills exist and the teachers know the skills for each team. So what is your role via the curriculum in ensuring that teachers use certain books to achieve that skill? Do you ask the teachers which books do you intend to use so that you can see to it they are ordered? How does that work?

SK: Once the determination has been made at the local school level that these are the books that will be used in Kanawha County Schools, then every school gets books based upon the student enrollment. Now you do not have to use those texts and ancillaries

which is different. My role is to make sure the skill is taught either via the textbook or some other means, whether its technology, demonstration or a speaker. I would think you would want to use the textbook as much as possible so I do check lesson plans in which the teacher should have the content standard for each subject area. I validate that through lesson plans and also through classroom observations. Then on Wednesdays we have teacher meetings where we come and talk about some objective measures that we use to measure mastery.

TM: As principal and as head of the school, do you have parents that approach you every so often with complaints about textbooks or reading that is being assigned? Complaints that are similar in kind to those complaints raised by Mary Alice Moore and her kind in 1974?

SK: No. I don't think you'll see those kinds of complaints anymore. I know you've seen in Nitro where we're having those but those are more books that are assigned for reading, not textbooks, those aren't textbooks. Textbooks anymore have become so benign that they are not going to be controversial. It's those selections of literature that teachers feel are legitimate that are somewhat controversial because they offend or violate some kind of ethical standard.

TM: We had talked about the inner city and bringing in African American cultures and injecting it into population, is there any insight into Ebonics and whether that is going to make inroads into textbooks or whether it is going to make inroads into literature. Do you have any thoughts on that?

SK: No, initially when Ebonics was touted as being acceptable language dialectical anyway we pooh-poohed that away. It's cultural, but we insist that they used standardized English. It's never been a real issue.

TM: With Christmas coming, how do you handle the Christmas tradition that is the holiday of St. Nick and the Christmas tree and other religious beliefs? Do you tell teachers here's how to handle this Santa Claus thing?

SK: Twelve years ago I made the very conscious decision to eliminate school on December the 7<sup>th</sup> so we don't have to deal with those things. The same with Halloween. We just don't observe it. It's public education so we divorce ourselves from it.

TM: Okay, I take it the same with regard to Easter?

SK: Yes, we just call them breaks, not Christmas break or Easter break.

TM: Just for purposes of people who may be reading this later, Piedmont is different, other than having the open classrooms, it's actually a year round school.

SK: Yes, we have a modified calendar. We start in July and then we go nine weeks and then we have a three week break.



TM: Was Piedmont year round back in '74?

SK: No, we became year round in 1996.

TM: Before we went on the tape, one thing you mentioned was you thought that this controversy had been a precursor for the national stage. What's your thought with regard to that?

SK: Now that the textbook publishers have seen the furor that this caused, they pretty much have been resolute in making sure that this doesn't happen again. Kanawha County's textbook controversy was mirrored in many small states. They didn't want to lose money again or fight school systems. It forced local school districts to provide parent involvement.

TM: I think I have seen somewhere after this controversy arose that there were similar incidents in surrounding states. Do you recall this while you were in school or do you think Kanawha County might have been the leading edge of the controversy and maybe empowered other persons and states and they took the banner and ran with it?

SK: I think the controversy in Kanawha County was the harbinger of what was to come in terms of textbook controversy. They probably were as ignorant, if you will, of what was being done in their schools. This was brought to light by a school board member and a parent. She was the catalyst for this controversy and to her credit her charge, befitting a school board member, was to make it known that these textbooks were not appropriate.

TM: One of the lessons that you've pointed out to avoid this problem in the future and to avoid repeating history, what school systems have done and should be doing is to involve parents in the process of selecting textbooks?

SK: Yes from the very beginning.

TM: That is coupling parents with professional educators.

SK: Yes, once the textbooks have been screened and you have made your recommendation to the board, then parents can screen these textbooks at local libraries. They are made available for parents to look at. You still might do it but you have the opportunity before the purchase is made to voice your opinion.

TM: Does your PTA or PTO arrive and ask questions about curriculum?

SK: I do get that periodically. I had a parent one time ask for all the material to prove that everything we used was purposeful and meaningful. I justify that at my level by stating that I'm doing what they're asking me to do. Sometimes I get parents that ask can you explain to me why you have chosen this particular methodology, sometimes its more about the assessment than the curriculum.



TM: How is evolution and creation addressed in the textbooks here?

SK: It is glossed over, they are briefly explained with about three or four sentences at the elementary level.

TM: Is there anything else you can recall that you would like to share?

SK: I have often tried to do some self analysis of what my position would have been if I had been a little bit more mature in the profession and if I had given more than a cursory glance at what I was instructing. I mean you know you teach page 1 to page 300. You might read a story prior to teaching or you may not. You're looking more at the skills than the story. I think it has made me more sensitive that there are certain moral and ethical sides of society and I can not be the moral compass. I have to be sensitive to that and if I come across something that I think will be objectionable, to balance censorship with what I think is in the best interest of kids. I think that the lesson that I took from the textbook controversy is to try and look at both sides of the story and not be judgmental and to try to find a compromise and that's what I try to do. At the local level, the hatred, it took lots of years for those scabs to heal. It was a lesson in civics and society. It was kind of humbling.

TM: Did you see or do you think that this had any effect on any of your contemporaries at the time? Do you recall this episode in '74 having an impact on other's lives?

SK: Piedmont in 1974, the mean age of that teaching population was probably early 30 and it was a very young faculty. They were hand picked by the principal for the enthusiasm and the free thinking, but this created a real angst. We disliked censorship but knew we needed to act in what was best for our kids. Three of those teachers went on to be superintendents, one of them to be state superintendent. I can't help but believe that the three superintendents that came out of Piedmont at that time took that as a lesson and make sure that it's not replicated.

TM: That's interesting, three teachers, what were their names?

SK: Dave Stewart, Carolyn Meadows, and Bill Grizzell. All three were superintendents and Dave Stewart became state superintendent.

TM: Is there anything else you would like to add feel free?

SK: That's basically it.

TM: I appreciate your time and cooperation for participating in the interview and before we conclude I'm going to hand you a form it is entitled "Oral History Release Form." I know we talked about it before we went on the record. It's on Marshall

University letterhead and this document, I know you've read it, and I'm going to ask if you have any questions about that document?

SK: No.

TM: Alright and will you sign that form?

SK: Yes.

TM: Okay and is that your signature at the bottom of the form now?

SK: Yes.

TM: With that said, I'm going to conclude this interview. When we get the transcript typed up, I'll be sure to send you a copy. If at any time you have any questions, just give me a holler.

SK: How about royalties?

TM: There are no royalties that I know of but should there be, I'm sure we can work something out. Thanks.

Marshall University  
1974 Kanawha County Textbook Controversy

NARRATOR: STEVE KNIGHTON

INTERVIEWER: TIMOTHY L. MAYO

Place: Piedmont Elementary School  
Charleston, West Virginia

No. of Tapes: 2  
No. of sides: 1

Date: November 25, 2007

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